

SENIOR CHEFS

Culinarians Serve Up Their Best for Annual Army Competition



PHOTOS BY MIKE STRASSER

Sgt. Donald Perry tops off his seafood appetizer with a warm medium dice mango chutney for the Senior Chef of the Year event during the 32nd Annual U.S. Army Culinary Arts Competition at Fort Lee, Va.

by Mike Strasser

Fort Lee Traveller

Fort Lee, Va. -- Sunlight creeps through the kitchen windows, hitting steel countertops and bouncing off pots and pans. Early morning, March 5, finds the first competitors in the Senior Chef of the Year event prepping menus and quietly deliberating the next four hours of the 2007 U.S. Army Culinary Arts Competition.

Silence breaks as a flurry of activity begins – chefs and apprentices move ingredients from fridge to work stations, and back again. Fruits and vegetables are chopped and diced. Meats, fish and poultry are prepped for their intended course. Some will be added to a soup or chowder, maybe a salad or entree.

Earlier, competitors drew numbers for the market baskets from which they work their culinary skills. From his basket, Pentagon chef Staff Sgt. Nolan Kniss was able to create a

chicken consommé and spring green salad with blackened sea bass and seared oysters. The main course was almond-crusted lamb chops with mushroom ragout, and for dessert, molten chocolate cake with macerated berries and crème anglaise sauce.

With four hours to cook four courses, and 30 minutes to serve each course to four American Culinary Federation judges for critique, timing is a crucial element in this event.

“The mystery basket requires them to look at the items they’ve got and decide what they can create in four hours, knowing their skill level, their equipment and capabilities,” said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Robert Sparks, chief of the culinary craft skills training branch of the Army Center of Excellence, Subsistence. “The smart thing to do is design a menu they can do reasonably well within that time limit. You don’t want to do more than you can practically do in four hours, and that’s where some

have a problem.”

Fort Bragg’s Sgt. 1st Class Bryan Nixon said that time management is the key to winning this event. It requires not only timing the preparation and cooking time for each course, but coordinating that time so each meal can be served at the proper interval. Nixon’s menu started with seafood chowder, followed by a chicken salad with raspberry vinaigrette. The entrée plate included a savory roasted lamb, whipped potatoes and vegetable medley. Dessert was an enticing trilogy of flavors – Dutch apple pie, lemon custard and black forrest cake. It’s been more than 10 years since Nixon last competed, but the New Jersey native said civilian and military experience in food service has kept his skills fine-tuned.

“My being away from this type of competition for the past ten years might pose a challenge to me,” Nixon said prior to the event. “But making food taste good and the presentation isn’t all that difficult. And there’s nothing more important than time management in a dining facility.”

Nixon said that while he hasn’t competed in recent years, he’s benefited from the experience of team manager Sgt. 1st Class Rodney Lubnow and team captain Sgt. 1st Class David Russ.

“Sgt. Russ is an incredible source of knowledge,” said Nixon. “The way he looks at things is the culinary standard, so everything he tells me, I’ve taken to heart. They’ve been very helpful and insightful of what the expectations are here. There’s nothing more unprecedented then what we’re



Fort Riley chef Sgt. Shannon Schriner heats things up as he sauteés asparagus to complement a rack of lamb, March 5, in the Senior Chef of the Year event during the culinary competition at Fort Lee, Va.

doing here at Fort Lee. It's the cream of the crop here."

Staff Sgt. Elizabeth Justo, a U.S. Culinary Arts Team member, returns for a second year as Fort Sill's senior chef, but has competed in different events in years past for Team Europe and Team Hawaii. With her expertise in pastries, she finds the challenge of preparing the four-course meals somewhat daunting.

"I'm much more confident this year, but still it's not going to be easy for me," said Justo. "We have a good team and I just want to do the best I can for our team."

The Marine Corps has been absent from this competition for several years, but are back this year in numerous categories. Gunnery Sgt. William Allison Jr. stepped up to the challenge

as senior chef. Allison said the competition is about "pride, prestige and culinary continuity." While this is his first U.S. Army Culinary Arts competition, he's kept busy this year in four other ACF competitions.

While Allison competed towards the end of the day's event, he maintained focus on his menu. Even with the sun setting outside the kitchen windows, the activity was as flurried as when the event began nearly 10 hours earlier. Fort Riley's Sgt. Riley Shannon Schriner was also one of the final competitors that evening, and breathed a sign of relief when it was over.

"It's been an education, and a great experience overall," said Schriner, who competed as senior chef in 2005.

In all, 16 chefs competed for the

title of the Army's top chef. At the conclusion of the event, Sparks said that the standard of competition was set high this year.

"I think overall, across the board, the quality of food looked good. The kitchen skills and sanitation awareness were good, so overall I think we got a great group of Soldiers, Coast Guard, Marines and Airmen trying out for awards and medals in this category."

For more culinary competition photos and articles, visit www.ima.lee.army.mil/sites/pao/2007_CulinaryComp_Dailies/about.htm